EIGHTH STREET
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-718

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HABS
DC
WASH,
599-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

EIGHTH STREET

HABS No. DC-718

Location: Interrupted by buildings and pedestrian plazas, the southernmost remaining segment of Eighth Street is between D and E streets, NW. From E to F streets, the right-of-way is limited to pedestrians, and between F and G streets, the street is interrupted by the Old Patent Office (now the National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of American Art). From the north side of the Patent Office, the street continues two blocks to I Street where it is again open only to pedestrians and is bridged by an overhead walkway. It is interrupted by Mount Vernon Square at K Street and then continues north, uninterrupted to the city boundary.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way spanning from building line to building line is the property of the U.S. government; the paved roadways, sidewalks, and planted areas between are under the jurisdiction of the D.C. Department of Public Works.

Present Use: The blocks that remain open to traffic serve as minor automotive routes. Three blocks are open to pedestrians only.

Significance: Eighth Street, flanked by Seventh and Ninth streets, marks a significant longitudinal axis connecting seven special sites on the L'Enfant plan and six on Ellicott's plan. Of these, the Mall, Market Square, the square where the Patent Office was built, and Mount Vernon Square remain significant urban spaces. All of the street in the southwest quadrant was obliterated by urban renewal in the 1950-60s, and the remaining segment in the northwest quadrant became the subject of heated debate in the late 1980s when a developer planned to bridge the right-of-way with an overhead walkway, closing one block to traffic and violating the vista between Mount Vernon Square and the Patent Office.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.

2. Alterations:

1802:	Market constructed in the right-of-way between the Mall and C Street.
ca. 1872:	Roadway paved with wood between C and N streets.
1882:	Mount Vernon Square landscaped as a rectangular park thereby diverting Eighth Street traffic.
1950-60s:	Street eliminated in the southwest quadrant during massive urban renewal.
1988:	Block between I and K streets closed to traffic; Techworld walkway built over the right-of-way.

B. Historical Context:

On Pierre L'Enfant's plan for Washington, Eighth Street is interrupted by a

string of spaces designated for special uses. With the exception of the Mall, all these spaces are bounded on the east and west sides by Seventh and Ninth streets. This corridor of special places begins at the Potomac River with a large triangular open space marked with a "C," explained in the accompanying references as "a Naval itinerary column proposed to be erected to celebrate the first rise of the Navy and to stand a ready monument to consecrate its progress and achievements." Six blocks to the north of the river, an open rectangular space is shaded yellow and marked "No. 3." One block to the north, the street is interrupted by the Mall. L'Enfant planned a canal along the north side of the Mall, and on the Eighth Street axis he planned a turning basin, perhaps associated with the open space one block north of the canal, that is distinguished with the letter "E," designating it as the site of one of the "five grand fountains intended with a constant spout of water." Two blocks north of the fountain is another open space marked with a "D," identifying it as the site of a church "intended for national purposes, such as public prayer, thanksgivings, funeral orations, etc., and assigned to no particular sect or denomination, but equally open to all. It will be likewise a proper shelter for such monuments as were voted by the late Continental Congress, for those heroes who fell in the cause of liberty, and for such others as may hereafter be decreed by the voice of grateful ration." Two major avenues (Massachusetts and New York) intersect two blocks north of the church site at another shaded rectangle, marked as "No. 2"; a rectangle marked "No. 15" interrupts the street several blocks to the north. These shaded and numbered sites were also described in L'Enfant's notes:

> The Squares colored yellow, being fifteen in number, are proposed to be divided among the several States in the Union, for each of them to improve, or subscribe a sum additional to the value of the land for that purpose, and the improvements around the squares to be completed in a limited time.
>
> The center of each Square will admit of Statues, Columns, Obelisks, or any other ornaments, such as the different States may choose to erect; to perpetuate not only the memory of such individuals whose Counsels or military achievements were conspicuous in giving liberty and independence to this Country; but also those whose usefulness hath rendered them worthy of general imitation: to invite Youth of succeeding generations to tread in the paths of those Sages or heroes whom their Country has thought proper to celebrate.
>
> The situation of these Squares is such that they are the most advantageously and reciprocally seen from each other, and as equally distributed over the whole City district, and connected by spacious Avenues round the grand Federal Improvements, and as contiguous to them, and at the same time as equally distant from each other, as circumstances would admit. The settlements round those squares must soon become connected.[1]

Andrew Ellicott's plan for the city, engraved in 1792 after L'Enfant's dismissal, omits L'Enfant's notations, but with the exception of the northernmost rectangle, retains the special areas on Eighth Street as open spaces.

The land encompassed by the street crossed through several of the tracts

---

[1] Legend on L'Enfant's 1791 plan of the city.

owned by Washington's original proprietors. South of the Mall, it ran through Cerne Abbey Manor, parts of which were owned by Notley Young and Daniel Carroll. North of the Mall, it ran through Beall's Levels and Elinor, both owned by David Burnes, a part of Port Royal owned by James Pierce, Jamaica owned by John Waring, and Flint's Discovery owned by Robert Peter.[2]

Some of the earliest construction in the city was located on the Eighth Street axis, such as Blodgett's Hotel at Eighth and E streets. Built in 1793-95, the "hotel" was the largest private structure in Washington in 1800.[3] Built by one of Washington's original landowners, Samuel Blodgett, to attract development to the area, the structure never served as a hotel. A building adjacent to Blodgett's, at Ninth and E Streets, served as an early governmental building when the nine-man post office department was located on its second floor. In 1810, the federal government purchased Blodgett's Hotel, as a new site for the growing Post Office Department and U. S. Patent Office. It was to save the patents stored here that Patent Office Director William Thornton stood between a British cannon and the building during the War of 1812. As the city smoldered after the 1814 invasion, Congress met in the building--the only federal office left standing--to discuss what was to be done about the national capital. The building and all the patents within were destroyed soon after, however, in an unintentional fire in 1836.[4] The Tariff Commission Building by Robert Mills was then built on the site and the Greek Revival Patent Office was erected on the Eighth Street axis between F and G streets in 1836-40.

While the early federal government developed the region around F and G streets, to the south, Eighth Street became a commercial hub after a market was erected in 1802 in the open space north of the canal (See Market Square, HABS No. DC-691). The thriving market encouraged other businesses to the area despite the fact that throughout the mid 1800s, the nearby canal had become more like an open sewer, emitting foul odors and flooding frequently. The same factors that led to its poor construction--namely, a lack of federal support and funding--discouraged construction of the turning basin designated by L'Enfant on this axis.

Toward the 1840s, development had spread north on Eighth Street to K Street. The thriving neighborhood, called Northern Liberties because of its distance from the center of the city, boasted such a large population in 1843 that residents petitioned the city government for permission to establish a public market in the federally owned open space at the intersection of New York and Massachusetts avenues and Eighth and K streets (later Mount Vernon Square). A brick market was erected in the space in 1846, followed by the Northern Liberties Fire Engine House, also built in the unimproved reservation. When elections were held in the public reservation June 1, 1857, the peace of the neighborhood was interrupted by a bloody riot (See Mount Vernon Square, HABS No. DC-682). Like the market at C Street, this market was also seen as a nuisance by the 1860s.

On the Boschke map of 1857-61, the Eighth Street corridor between the Mall and N Street appears to be one of the most densely built in the city, lined with an almost continuous facade of stores, offices, churches, and residences. The

---

[2] McNeil, 42-43.

[3] Colyer, 84.

[4] Goode, 160-61.

roadway even appears to have been equipped with gas street lamps, although it is possible that the city's poor finances limited their use.

During widespread public improvements undertaken by the territorial government formed after the Civil War, Eighth Street was paved with wood from the Mall north to M Street. The Northern Liberties Market was torn down and the open space landscaped as a park. Near the Mall, the decrepit Central Market was replaced with a new building designed by Washington architect Adolph Cluss that gained national recognition for its modern sanitary features. The noxious canal was diverted into a culvert and made into a roadway.

Although the territorial government was dissolved in debt and scandal in 1874, its vast improvements changed the face of the city, ushering in an era of development and prosperity in the 1870-80s. Several of the small department stores that opened on the Eighth Street axis during these decades would become major chains in the twentieth century. One of the earliest was Andrew Saks's clothing store; although he opened his first store in Washington at the corner of Seventh and Market Place in 1867, his Saks Fifth Avenue chain would be named after a later store he opened in New York. The Boston Dry Goods shop built on the same block in 1880 was the start of the Woodward and Lothrop chain. S. Kann & Sons opened a department store on Market Square in the 1890s, and by the mid twentieth century, a string of additions to the store encompassed the whole block between Seventh and Eighth streets.[5]

While the corridor thrived as a commercial and governmental hub, with the improvement of transportation methods, Seventh Street became the most traveled of the three streets in the corridor. Eighth Street, with its many interruptions, became only a minor connecting roadway, while Seventh Street continued uninterrupted south to the Potomac River and north to the farmland beyond the boundary. By the turn of the century, the character of the neighborhoods along Eighth Street, NW, began to change. As the south end of the avenue near the market and along Seventh Street became progressively commercial, the northern blocks were lined with simple brick and frame dwellings. By 1887, almost a solid line of modest rowhouses spanned all the way to Boundary Street (later Florida Avenue).

In 1899 Congress authorized the erection of the Andrew Carnegie Library in Mount Vernon Square, but with the rise of the automobile that converted Seventh Street and New York Avenue to major commuting arteries, the elegant Neoclassical building was soon surrounded by liquor stores, laundries, service stations, and garages. The Depression exacerbated the shift along the northern segment of the corridor from owner-occupied dwellings to boardinghouses, and also affected changes at the south end near Center Market. In the 1920-30s, the Federal Triangle complex was built in the region delineated by Pennsylvania Avenue and B Street, renamed Constitution Avenue in 1931; Center Market, near the apex, was demolished in 1933 for construction of the National Archives. The clearing of the neighborhood along Pennsylvania Avenue displaced the Chinese community between Third and Sixth streets, so it moved to H Street between Sixth and Seventh streets.[6] As the community grew, Chinatown spread west to encompass the three blocks of Eighth Street between the old Patent Office and

---

[5] Goode, 268-71.

[6] Lim, 38.

Mount Vernon Square.

Construction of the Federal Triangle was Washington's first large-scale redevelopment project and was soon followed by the massive redevelopment of the southwest quadrant that eradicated Eighth Street, SW. Southwest had developed rather early as a residential area, near the busy wharves on the Potomac River. Although it remained unpaved until the turn of the century, Eighth Street, SW, was developed much as the other streets in this quadrant, with small brick and frame rowhouses and a small church to serve the local population. South of G Street, the roadway was flanked by lumber and storage yards. The large reservation on the Eighth Street corridor, at the intersection of Maryland and Virginia avenues, was never developed as an ornate park like its many counterparts in the northwest quadrant. After railroad tracks were laid through it in the late 1800s, a government warehouse was built on its south side between the two World Wars.

Because the southwest quadrant was divided from the rest of the city--first by the canal, then by railroad tracks--in the early decades of the twentieth century it was noted for poor housing, crime, and contagious diseases. Southwest redevelopment schemes began in the 1940s and took on many forms and permutations before the neighborhood was bulldozed in the 1950s. By the time the project was complete in the 1970s, the old Eighth Street right-of-way was covered by three massive federal buildings that encompassed the three blocks south of the Mall between Seventh and Ninth streets, and it was crossed by the Southeast/Southwest Freeway at the site of G Street. The three blocks south of G Street were also cleared, leaving nothing of the former roadway.

While urban redevelopment changed the face of Southwest and completely eliminated Eighth Street, SW, the region north of the Mall along Pennsylvania Avenue had deteriorated enough to elicit comment from President John F. Kennedy after his inaugural parade in 1961. Around the same time redevelopment plans were introduced for Southwest, planners began discussing ways to revitalize the downtown district through which Eighth Street runs from Pennsylvania Avenue to Mount Vernon Square. Stores in the commercial center of the city suffered as crime, parking shortages, and traffic congestion drove customers to suburban Malls. By the 1940s, several of the decaying structures along this commercial corridor of Eighth Street had been torn down and used as parking lots. Like the southwest redevelopment, many plans were proposed, but before any significant action was taken, downtown suffered another setback during the riots of 1968 prompted by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Among many blocks burned and looted were several along the Eighth Street corridor in the vicinity of Mount Vernon Square, although the segment in Chinatown was spared.

After years of decline and overcrowding, the Carnegie Library had been moved from the facility in the park to the new District of Columbia Public Library at Ninth and G Streets. Likewise, the Patent Office moved out of the old building and the U.S. General Services Administration planned to demolish the structure in the mid 1950s to build a parking garage requested by local businesses. Public outcry halted demolition and in 1958 the building was turned over to the Smithsonian Institution for use as the National Portrait Gallery.[7]

In an effort to revitalize the decimated neighborhood in the 1970s, a convention center encompassing four city squares was built west of Ninth Street between H and K streets. The Washington, D.C., Convention Center spawned a

[7] Colyer, 164.

rash of new hotels and office buildings in the blocks south of the square including, perhaps the most controversial development of the decade, Techworld. Designed to attract high-technology industries to the downtown area, this mirrored-glass structure built between Seventh and Ninth streets features an enclosed pedestrian bridge crossing over the Eighth Street axis. Arguing that the proposed bridge would violate the planned vista between Mount Vernon Square and one of the original seventeen reservations set aside in 1792, preservationists sued the developers, unsuccessfully. Construction of Techworld was supported by Mayor Marion Barry, the D.C. Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, and the D.C. Zoning Commission. Its opponents included two ex officio members of the D.C. Board of Commissioners representing the interests of Congress and the National Park Service, the Commission of Fine Arts, the National Capital Planning Commission, and a variety of preservation groups.[8]

Although development may have marred the vista north from the Patent Office to Mount Vernon Square, the Pennsylvania Avenue Development Corporation (PADC) sought to emphasize the vista between the Patent Office and National Archives, and to bring residents back to this section of the city. A memorial to the U. S. Navy, featuring fountains, pools, statuary, and a paved plaza representing a map of the world, was constructed in 1987 on the Eighth Street axis north of Pennsylvania Avenue. Two colonnaded buildings ringing the Navy Memorial were also built as part of the PADC scheme to frame Eighth Street, which runs through the Market Square complex as an ornamental pedestrian walkway. North of Market Square, the historic facade of the Lansburgh Department Store still faces the street from the east, integrated into the design of a new residential complex called the Lansburgh.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: The street is 100' wide from building line to building line.

2. Length within the historic city limits: From the north side of the National Archives to Florida Avenue, the road is approximately 1.5 miles.

B. Elements within the right-of-way:

1. Roadway: Where it remains open to traffic, the Eighth Street roadway is approximately 50' wide and supports two lanes of two-way traffic.

2. Sidewalks and street trees: The concrete sidewalks running the length of the street have cutouts for trees. The street trees on the whole are in poor condition throughout, except along the pedestrian walkway between E and F streets, where they are in good condition. This walkway is illuminated by modern fixtures that differ from those along the rest of the street. The pedestrian walkway between I and K streets is lined with Washington Globe lamps and trees and shrubs in planters.

---

[8] Colyer, 268, 283.

3. Reservations:

a. Eighth Street begins at D Street on the north side of Market Square (See HABS No. DC-691).

b. At K Street, Eighth Street is diverted around Mount Vernon Square (See HABS No. DC-682).

c. Before the Southwest redevelopment, Eighth Street was diverted around Reservation No. 113 at the intersection of Maryland and Virginia Avenues (See Virginia Avenue, HABS No. DC-712).

C. Framing elements: From D Street to Mount Vernon Square, Eighth Street is flanked by new construction and recently renovated buildings, interspersed with a variety of historic structures in varying states of repair. For the most part, the structures lining the street exceed six stories. The two blocks north of Mount Vernon Square, are flanked by four entirely vacant blocks that serve as parking lots. From M Street to Florida Avenue, a variety of mid-rise apartment buildings and three- and four-story rowhouses, as well as a school, face onto the street.

D. Vistas:

a. Reciprocal views between the National Archives and the old Patent Office are "framed" by the large complex constructed at Market Square.

b. The reciprocal views between the library in Mount Vernon Square and the Old Patent Office are "framed" by the overhead, glass walkway between the two buildings of the Techworld complex.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Baist, G. W. "Baist's Real Estate Atlas of Surveys of Washington, D. C." Philadelphia, 1887, 1903, 1913, 1919, 1924, 1932, 1939, 1956, and 1968.

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

U. S. Army Corps of Engineers. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

B. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1867-1933.

Colyer, George Speer. "The L'Enfant Plan in Downtown Washington: Its History and Prospects for Survival." Master's Thesis, George Washington University, 1987.

Federal Writers Project. Washington City and Capital. Works Progress Administration. Washington, D.C.: GPO. 1937.

Goode, James M. Capital Losses: A Cultural History of Washington's Destroyed Buildings. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979.

Hawkins, Don Alexander. "The Landscape of the Federal City: A 1792 Walking Tour." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 10-33.

Lim, Wendy. Chinatown, D.C.: A Photographic Journal. Washington, D.C.: Asian American Arts and Media Inc., 1991.

Market Square: Selections from the Historic American Buildings Survey. Issued jointly by the Urban Design and Development Corporation and the Historic American Buildings Survey. Washington: 1969.

McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City." Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 34-51.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
Project Historian
National Park Service
1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.